Route 66 Revisited

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The Old Trails Highway, the Mother Road, the Will Rogers Highway, Main Street of America … or just Route 66. These nicknames reflect America's affection for the road that wound for 2,282 miles through eight states, from Chicago to Los Angeles. People from all over the world are once again getting their kicks on Route 66. But it has also been the subject of serious study, and this paper outlines some of the methods used to identify, evaluate, and interpret its significance.

It seems as though Route 66 has about as many different manifestations as it had nicknames. Like any engineered structure, it was improved through the years, and hacked away at by its replacements. By-passed sections crumbling on the landscape are rather like a jigsaw puzzle that, put together, can reveal much about the evolution of automotive transportation in America.

My focus is on Route 66 in Arizona and through the Kaibab National Forest. This is the highest stretch of Route 66 in the country, located just west of Flagstaff and south of the Grand Canyon. The forest headquarters is in the City of Williams, which in 1984 entered the history books as the last Route 66 town by-passed by the interstate highway system. Williams held a party to commemorate the event, and Bobby Troup sang his song "Get Your Kicks on Route 66" on the new Interstate 40 bypass. During a speech mourning the passing of "Old 66," an unnamed state highway official whispered to Kaibab National Forest Recreation Officer Dennis Lund, "I don't know why everyone's making such a fuss. Route 66 is like an old can of tuna—once you've used it up, you throw it away!" Lund disagreed and figured that a lot of other people would too, so he set out to ensure that Route 66 would not be forgotten.

Route 66 sign, Williams, AZ. Photo by the author.

In 1988 the Kaibab National Forest began a systematic inventory of all the remnants within its boundaries and nominated seven of them to the National Register of Historic Places. This discussion follows the format used in the nomination (Cleeland 1988). First, some historical context.

Route 66 began in the ancient past, with aboriginal trails linking trade partners from the Great Plains to coastal California. In 1859, the Beale Wagon Road was built along these old trails. Traces of it across Arizona have since been inventoried. Edward F. Beale prophetically proclaimed that his route would "… eventually be the greatest emigrant road to California." (Beale 1858). A transcontinental railroad followed Beale's path in 1883. Towns soon grew up along the railroad, and roads linked their main streets. The stage was set for Route 66.

The decade of the teens saw the development of interstate highways, but roads were still basically old wagon routes. Road maps from 1913 depict the future path of Route 66 as a rough and tortuous dirt track with few signs to mark the way.

It would be years before travelers saw any real improvements. Finally, between 1920 and 1923, the future US Highway 66 in Arizona was designed and built. The narrow travelway was graded and cinder-surfaced, and new bridges and culverts were constructed at canyon and river crossings. Most reflected the skills of local craftsmen, and were not built to standard plans. The improvement was remarkable, even though the road remained narrow, twisting, steep, and unpaved.

Boosters had named the route between Chicago and Los Angeles the National Old Trails Highway, because it linked together segments of old trails. In 1926, when every interstate highway received a number, it was officially designated U.S. Highway 66 (Scott and Kelly 1988).

The United States experienced an explosive increase in automobile use during the 1920s, but the roads were no longer adequate for the heavy traffic loads. This was especially true of Route 66. In part to relieve Depression-era unemployment, Route 66 was rebuilt through Arizona in the early 1930s. The new highway reflected the engineering advances of the previous decade. It had a straighter alignment made possible by deep cuts in hills and greater quantities of fill material to make the grade as gentle as possible. Standardized concrete box culverts replaced the earlier handcrafted ones. A wider travelway, improved visibility, guard rails, and pavement increased the road's safety and driving ease. In 1938, Route 66 became the first completely paved cross-country highway in the United States.

It seems that U.S. Highway 66 was in the right place at the right time in history. As it was completed to the engineering standards of the day, events happened along its path that would cement it into the folklore of America. Great Plains dust storms began one of the greatest migrations in our country's history, sending refugees to California. John Steinbeck immortalized the people and the "Mother Road" in his 1939 book *The Grapes of Wrath.* John Ford's movie of the same name increased the road's notoriety.

Many others traveled toward California, not to escape despair, but to seize opportunity in the growing west. Americans took vacations along Route 66, and entrepre-

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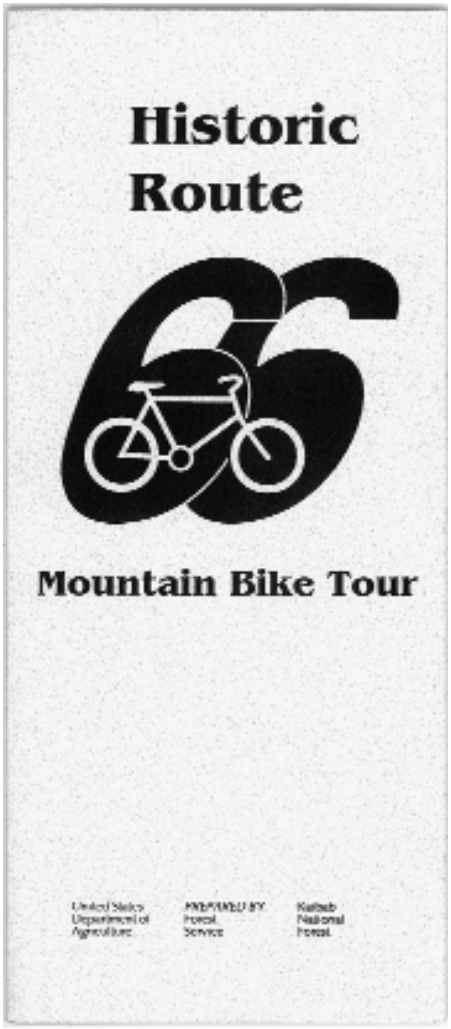
neurs vied for the traveling trade with roadside attractions like teepees, snake pits, and Indian dancers. Restaurants, curio shops, campgrounds, gas stations, and motor courts sported flashing neon signs, bright colors, and unusual shapes—anything to lasso in tourists.

Post World War II prosperity brought a steady increase in automobile travelers. One of them was Bobby Troup, who in 1946 drove to California along the route, and wrote the famous musical roadmap song "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66". Later, the television series "Route 66" renewed interest in the highway, even though few episodes were ever filmed on the road (Wallis 1990). Route 66 was celebrated in song, in books, and on the silver screen, but fame had a downside—overcrowding on the road.



Although Route 66 had received constant maintenance through the years, it began to show wear. Traffic congestion increased, especially in the small towns along the way. In 1944, Congress passed the Federal Highway Act, which eventually spelled doom to Route 66. Among other things, it authorized a limited access interstate highway system to connect major metropolitan areas and to help serve in the national defense. Although it was not acted upon until 1956, the 1944 act set the stage for this profound change in federal highway policies.

Route 66 was gradually by-passed until 1984, when the last link in the interstate was opened at Williams, Arizona. But it endures as the main street of many towns. Some stretches are now rural byways; others lie abandoned, sliced up by their interstate replacement. But people would not let the road go, and recent years have witnessed a ground swell of interest in the historic highway. Route 66 associations thrive in each state through which it passed, and even in other countries. The Route 66 Study Act of 1990 has initiated a National Park Service study of the road and associated remnants. The rest of this paper outlines the Kaibab National Forest program to identify, evaluate, nominate, protect, and interpret Route 66.

Identification

Relocating and identifying the various sections of Route 66, or any other highway, can be a challenge. It was not always obvious whether a particular stretch of road was once a part of Route 66, especially because it changed in appearance with each improvement. Old maps provide a first step toward identifying highways' general locations, but are often not detailed enough. Some, however, do show the precise location of the road as it weaves through town centers. Engineering plans provide far more detail, such as the alignment of by-passed sections, cross sections of grades, bridge designs, and roadside structures. Accompanying survey and construction reports give even more information, including history of previous construction, costs, materials, justification for locating new alignments, and so on. Engineering plans can sometimes be found at local land management agencies, county recorder's offices, and state and county highway departments.

Another useful source for the study was *Arizona Highways* magazine, which began as a highway engineer's trade journal. Each issue revealed the progress of highway construction throughout the state. Newspapers of the day also heralded new roads, and these provide good historical context. Some states maintain archives of highway department photographs that depict stretches of roadway, sometimes with captions regarding condition and other information. Although incidental to their main purpose, these photographs also show roadside structures. Photographs may also be found at local historical societies, museums, libraries, and land management agencies.

Old guide books and oral histories are good sources for information on road locations and conditions as well as roadside attractions. These accounts also enliven what might otherwise be a sterile assessment of material culture.

Postcards, even with their inherent shortcomings, depict highways and the businesses alongside them. The Curt Teich postcard collection in Illinois is a well-organized archive with telephone assistance available.

Aerial photographs are also useful for tracing historic highways. These provide a bird's-eye view that reveal old alignments and their relationship with each other as well as with the topography. The evolution of highway construction technology can be considered as the triumph of engineering over geography. The various alignments of Route 66 at Ash Fork Hill in Arizona, a 1,700' high escarpment, illustrate this point. The aerial photograph shows the 1922 section's twists and turns as it ascends the side of the canyon without the aid of landscape modification to improve alignment. By 1932, deep cuts and fills smoothed the grade and lessened curves. In 1950, engineers again realigned this troublesome section by blasting a new artificial grade straight up through the steep canyon. (Interstate 40 later followed this same route.) The tremendous costs of improved alignment and grades on the new roadway were justified by the increase in traffic and higher speed limits.

Once alignments are traced out on current topographic maps from aerial photographs and old maps, field investigations can provide additional clues and verification. Construction dates were sometimes marked on culverts and bridges. Rusty road signs, license plates, and other

artifacts sometimes line the highway. However, roadsides were often cleaned up in anti-litter campaigns, and most discards found along old Route 66 alignments postdate the road's abandonment.

Evaluation

The field inventory of Route 66 revealed some 100 miles of parallel road segments within the 35 mile Kaibab National Forest boundaries. These were in varying condition, representing 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and later alignments. One went through Williams' city center, others were now rural byways, and many others had long been abandoned. For the National Register nomination, these were organized into three property types, based on current use and appearance.

Abandoned Route 66. These sections of Route 66 appear today essentially as archeological sites. No longer accessible by automobile and long forgotten, they lie exposed to natural forces of disintegration. Bridges, culverts, curbing, guard rails, right-of-way markers, centerlines, and other associated features often remain in place, although some of these may have been removed at the time of abandonment. Some stretches were never paved, and in some areas, pavement was ripped up to restore the alignment to a more natural appearance. Roadside properties are rarely found in these sections (with the possible exception of informal camp sites) because they required continued access following realignment projects. Three examples of Abandoned Route 66 were listed in the National Register.

Rural Route 66. These stretches of Route 66 remain in use for local access. As Route 66 was rebuilt, these sections were transferred from state highway departments to local, usually county, control. These agencies provide routine maintenance in the form of patching, paving, and grading. Original culverts, bridges, right-of-way markers, and other features are usually found along these sections. Pavement may have been removed or replaced through the years. Associated properties such as curio shops, gas stations, tourist camps, and motels (both active and abandoned), are often present. Three examples of Rural Route 66 were listed in the National Register.

Urban Route 66. The "Main Street of America" passed through the towns and cities in its path. The highway was flanked by historic buildings in downtown areas (often designated Historic Districts), and it encouraged strip development. Motels, gas stations, restaurants, curio shops, and other tourist facilities line the highway at the periphery of towns. During the historic period, development tended to be toward the eastern edge of towns. Since most traffic was heading west, each business wanted to be the first one that travelers saw (Wurtz 1987). One example of Urban Route 66, through the City of Williams, was listed in the National Register.

Nomination

All three property types have similar National Register registration requirements. First, a road segment must have been a part of U.S. Highway 66 between 1926 and 1944. The beginning date is the year of the highway's official designation within the national highway system. To be eligible, a road section could have been built before 1926, but it must have been in use in 1926 or later. The 1944 end date coincides with the passage of the Federal Highway Act, which altered highway policies. This date is also close to the standard 50-year National Register cutoff date. Eventually, it should be extended to include all the years that Route 66 was in use. In Williams, we'll probably have to amend the forms in 2034, 50 years after the 1984 bypass.

These association requirements are why it is so important to accurately identify and date road segments.

By separating Route 66 into different property types, integrity evaluations can be made based on current appearance, which is a function of use. Properties can only be compared within separate categories because they are functionally and morphologically distinct. An abandoned road looks different than a maintained one,

Route 66, 1922 alignment (left) and 1932-33 alignment (right), 1988.

which looks different than an urban one. However, certain elements are common to all three. Integrity of design is the most important element. Eligible segments retain the essential features that identify them as highways. These include the original cross-section template (comprised of cut banks, fill slopes, road bed, grade, and go forth), original alignment, and at least some associated features like culverts and bridges. Pavement is inherently fragile and often covered over, tom up, or replaced. Some early alignments of Route 66 never were paved. So, while original pavement would be a desired feature, it is not a registration requirement.

Property boundaries extend to the original right-of-way, 66' to each side of the road's centerline (66' feet is a surveyor's chain measurement, not a tribute to the highway's designation). The end points were determined by integrity evaluations; often the ends were defined by later interstate highway construction that buried the road.

Feeling and setting are subjective but important elements. Nominated sections should be sufficiently long to preserve the feeling and setting of a continuous road. An ideal would be an uninterrupted view down the road to the horizon. The setting should reflect the character of the historic period, with minimal intrusive elements. Associated roadside properties from the historic period add to the feeling of historicity.

The Kaibab nomination did not include any adjacent properties, simply because the Forest Service does not

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own any. Roadside attractions such as motels, gas stations, curio shops, tourist camps, even signs, could be added to the nomination as a separate property type. They are important to recognize as an integral part of the highway experience—they help to define the road's meaning—yet they are rapidly being destroyed. Recognizing and preserving significant roads and roadside properties is a challenge in today's throw-away society .

Protection

National Register listing is just the first step in an overall preservation plan for the historic highway. Protection and interpretive measures are equally important. Soon after Route 66 was listed in the National Register, a programmatic agreement was drawn up for the management and maintenance of listed Route 66 sections authorized under easements to Coconino County (Kaibab National Forest 1989). This agreement specifically lists construction and maintenance procedures that may or may not have an adverse effect on the road's integrity, and when consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office is required. This agreement allows the County to perform routine maintenance without time-consuming consultation procedures, and spells out which activities could adversely affect the road's integrity, and thus trigger consultation.

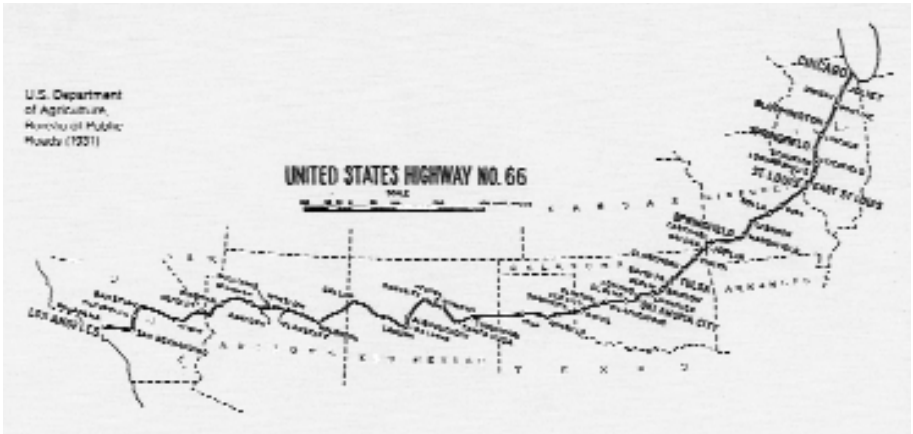
Wherever possible, abandoned stretches of Route 66 have been closed to vehicular traffic. This reduces damage to fragile pavement, and provides recreational opportunities.

Interpretation

The Kaibab National Forest has developed two interpretive tours for Route 66. One is an auto tour between Williams and Flagstaff. It includes a short hiking trail on a stretch of abandoned road now closed to traffic. The other is a mountain bicycle tour for those who want to get their kickstands on Route 66. Two interpretive loops on abandoned stretches combine an outbound ride on the unpaved 1920s road with a return on the improved 1930s stretch.

In Williams, Route 66 is featured in a walking tour of the Historic District. The shield-shaped commemorative symbol was combined with "no parking" signs to mark the route through town. The Kaibab National Forest and Coconino County cooperated to place similar signs along the auto tour route, but these proved to be too tempting to thieves. Twenty signs were posted, using vandal-resistant measures, and within the first week, 16 were stolen. Signs located in remote areas were most vulnerable, while those in populated areas or at busy intersections remain standing.

We have done much more with Route 66, including promotions to celebrate its 66th anniversary, but this paper can only allude to them. This conference is an indication of the tremendous interest in our efforts to discover and preserve historic travelways. Let's hit the road and get started.



Route 66 map. Courtesy U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Public Roads, 1931.

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For information on the Curt Teich postcard collection, contact: Lake County Museum, Lakewood Forest Preserve, Wauconda, IL 60084; 708-526-8638.

For information on ordering aerial photographs, contact: USDA ASCS Aerial Photography Field Office, 2222 West 2300 South, P.O. Box 30010, Salt Lake City, UT 84130-0010; 801-975-3503.

[In recent years, Route 66 has been featured in books, magazines, newspapers, journals, and television news stories. Because this paper concentrates on original research, very few of those many sources are cited.]

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